

# O-e Member's Voice

One Member's Voice is YOUR column – a place to voice your opinion regarding timely educational or school-related topics and issues.

## Back to Basics with Helping Children Post- COVID

*By Dr. Thomas Krout, Principal, Washington Elementary School*



We often hear the phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” (Achebe, 1954). I could not agree more. I believe in today’s society our schools work in a multitude of ways to help support children and young adults within the post-COVID pandemic era. These methods often require educational teams to look at data, research best practices for academic success and/or have a structured parent-teacher conference to help make sure each party communicates effectively.

But perhaps we need to take a lesson from the old knocks of school administration and begin to slow down, and resort to some time-honored methods of successful leadership practices that proved effective for decades of learning. These critical ideas are often overlooked and pushed to the side for more modern types of computer-based surveys, questionnaires and/or text/email responses.

Perhaps we move back to the 3 Cs of learning and discussing with our children. I have used these 3 Cs – caring, commitment and connections – as my platform for success for over 32 years. They often work within a triad of cooperation and also strive to be equal in all three areas.

The first one is **caring**. Back in the ole’ days of the 1970s, my dad often told me to listen more and talk less. It seems like a simple concept, but think about it...when was the last time you interrupted someone when they were talking? Force yourself to watch for this, and you will be surprised at how many times it occurs during the standard workday. The same goes for children; we need to listen to them and begin to meet them at their eye level to gain information, model respect and then begin to create a plan of action. I often catch myself creating the plan as they are speaking to me about the concern. This is not modeling active listening. Another school-based example includes greeting the children at the front door each morning. This can be challenging for a school administrator with busy meetings and staff issues. However, the importance to children is second to none. Greeting children firsthand gives you a true feel for the day and helps you to predict areas of concern using an accurate sense of visible data imperative for a successful school day. Another example exemplifying a caring school culture includes a successful school advisory council. I nickname this the “S.A.C.” group. I use these meetings to roundtable and listen to student concerns or schoolwide improvement issues. This two-way communication provides a great learning atmosphere that promotes teamwork and a high level of care.

The second area to improve upon is **commitment**. We are in a fast-paced world, and it doesn’t look like that will be changing anytime soon. As they begin to construct a third and fourth lane to the already crowded drive-through lanes at local fast-food businesses, we find ourselves needing to adapt to the “new.” However, when we become invested or committed to an organization, it is our duty to become “full time.” This may mean staying extra to complete work, using the web-based platforms from home to help solidify someone in the hiring process over the weekend and /or being fully present at an evening function, event or concert. I recently attended a community football game in which our young student-athletes were playing. They thought it was so cool their principal was attending the game, watching with purpose and taking pictures to be placed on the school TV monitors the following day. They also noticed my transparency as their school principal was actually wearing jeans. We must invest in our jobs and roles and begin to make a real commitment to focus on children and young adults, demonstrating to them that we are committed to their whole learning process and we care about them. Commitment is showing we care at all times!

The final triad is **connections**. This focal area has always been a true inspiration for me as I begin my 25<sup>th</sup> year in public school administration. I have realized that not everyone has the uncanny ability to make connections with people. Some would rather stay in the background and not become engaged. That is okay! But for those of us who love interacting with people, we need to use this and showcase what we can do to help make children’s lives more meaningful and engaged within the learning process. Many great coaches are strong in this category because they can relate and make deep connections with young learners. This innate ability can be fostered and enhanced to move into the world of knowledge and learning. An example of this “C” is greeting children by name in the hallways and around the school building. Children are impressed by my ability to not only know their name, but to know their reading level, their math grade and/or family dynamics (brothers and sisters who went to this school previously). I truly believe personalizing the learning process through

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# Pathways to Success at Garden Spot High School

By Dr. Matthew Sanger, Jill Hackman, John Robbins and Dr. Michael Snopkowski



## About the Authors:

**Dr. Matthew Sanger** has served as the Principal at Garden Spot High School in the Eastern Lancaster County (ELANCO) School District for the last 10 years. He earned his Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Delaware.

**Jill Hackman** has been a Teacher at Garden Spot High School in the ELANCO School District for 18 years. She has served in the role of career coordinator for the last seven years. She earned her Master of Education from Wilkes University and completed her Co-operative Education Certificate from Temple University.

**John Robbins** has served as the Transition Coordinator (four years), Special Education Consultant (seven years) and as Job Coach Coordinator for the 11 years he has worked for Garden Spot High School and Middle School in the ELANCO School District. He has 22 years' experience working with transition-aged youth in work-based learning experiences and programs.

**Dr. Michael Snopkowski** has been the Superintendent of the ELANCO School District since February 2022. Before that, he served in a variety of administrative roles in the Avon Grove School District and the Rose Tree Media School District. He earned his Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Delaware.

Garden Spot High School in the Eastern Lancaster County School District is preparing learners for their futures through an authentic variety of academic and community-based experiences. What began several years ago as an effort to support learners with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) make a successful post-secondary transition has grown into a comprehensive series of experiences that will include all learners at the high school. Through partnerships with multiple businesses and community organizations, each learner is experiencing a *Career Coaching* approach to guide their learning and planning during their high school years.

## Research and Value

The incorporation of authentic work-based experiences for learners in the traditional high school setting is increasingly seen as not only a way to enhance the academic experience of a learner, but also as a gateway for employment. Through research by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), increasingly greater attention is being paid by employers to the internships, work-based experiences and skills demonstrated by potential employees, while less attention is being focused on the GPA of an applicant (Gray, 2022). Additionally, career exploration and development while in high school can guide post-secondary decision-making, especially at a time when the cost of attending college continues to rise at a significant rate (Kerr & Wood, 2022). Finally, the value of these experiences is being recognized through the Pennsylvania Department of Education and is a key component in each school's Future Ready Index, Industry-Based Learning score.

## History

Beginning in 2015 with the assignment of a teacher to a part-time role, the Garden Spot High School co-op program was born. This program was developed to prepare learners for high-priority, high-skill, high-paying 21<sup>st</sup>-century careers, and focused on learners who did not anticipate pursuing additional formal education after high school graduation. The combination of a rich classroom experience focused on employability and "soft" skills, with release time to practice and develop these skills at a local employer, was intended to prepare learners to pass the WorkKeys exams from CareerLink and be a springboard into successful employment.

The co-op program was an expansion of supports and experiences already in place to provide unique and individualized experiences for specialized groups of learners. These included learners with Individualized Education Programs (IEP) throughout their transition plan implementation, or who were nearing their graduation or aging out of the high school. In a similar way, English learners also were part of the program and were working to generalize the skills being learned in the classroom to another setting. From the program's beginning, the individualized needs of each learner were emphasized and aligned with experiences to help them be successful.

After several years of positive experiences, the core team began to explore the possibility of expanding the program. The implications of this meant not only increased internal staff, but a significant outreach to the local community to provide opportunities for learners. On a practical level, an expansion would also require the logistics and infrastructure to be in place to get learners to and from their experiences. In short, the program needed to move from a part-



Learners are often tasked with designing and building solutions to real problems faced by the business community.

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time commitment to a means through which Garden Spot High School would be able to meet its mission and the needs of its learners.

### Pathways to Success

The evolution of the program and its expansion to serve all learners at Garden Spot High School has been occurring since 2015 in clear and incremental ways. The original assignment of one job coach and one part-time teacher has grown into two full-time teachers and five job coaches supporting learners in all aspects of the program. Transportation for learners to get to job sites for shadowing has been made possible through the alignment of district policies and schedules, as well as the funding of the purchase of a van.

Just as importantly, the network of community partners has expanded to provide enough options so that all of the approximately 450 learners in grades 9 and 10 will have two site-based experiences each year. This is directly attributable to the networking and collaboration between the Garden Spot team and the school district community. This collaborative effort is centered on the belief that these experiences for Garden Spot High School learners are critical in their individual development, as well as supportive of the ongoing sustainability and growth of the entire community in the future.

### Career Coaching

Garden Spot High School expects every learner's pathway will be unique and constantly evolving. The strengths, interests and needs of each learner will change over time and the plan developed to maximize their high school experience needs to change with them. To support each learner throughout this process, the Career Coaching framework, adapted from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Office of Career and Professional Development, is the foundation each experience is built upon and emphasizes four components in meeting the needs of our learners:

- Reflecting on strengths and interests
- Exploring career and education options
- Developing skills and experiences
- Connecting with people and opportunities

The Garden Spot High School Career Coaching program begins in ninth grade and integrates a series of authentic experiences for each learner. The focus of ninth and tenth grade is to align each learner's interests and strengths with work-based experiences. This frequently occurs with small groups visiting local businesses or organizations, under the supervision of one of the district's job coaches. After each experience, learners will reflect on the experience and determine if their current goals and plans are still in alignment with their experiences, or if they need to make any adjustments. As learners enter their junior year, increased emphasis will be placed on the connections between career interests, academic planning, and workplace experiences, very likely spurring discussion and preparation for internship opportunities.



**Authentic experiences partner learners with practitioners in the field.**

During their senior years, learners will have the opportunity to deepen their career exploration and readiness through internships in the community. These may be paid or unpaid and are usually scheduled for one semester for each learner. Communication between the internship provider, the high school, and the learner is ongoing throughout the experience and embedded in the assignments and online submissions made by each learner throughout the internship. Onsite visitations are also conducted by the career coordinator as a means of providing just-in-time feedback and learning opportunities within the school day.

For learners who may not take advantage of a full internship program, the co-op program is an option, as is the *Access Success* program. Developed for learners who have experienced significant disruption during their educational careers, are at risk of not graduating, or who may need an even more personalized experience, *Access Success* combines core academic development, work-place skills and training and counseling support. While still a relatively new addition to the Pathways to Success options, the 2021-2022 school year saw 21 learners participate in this program, remain enrolled at Garden Spot High School and either graduate or make significant strides toward doing so. (See Figure 1 on page ?)

### Future

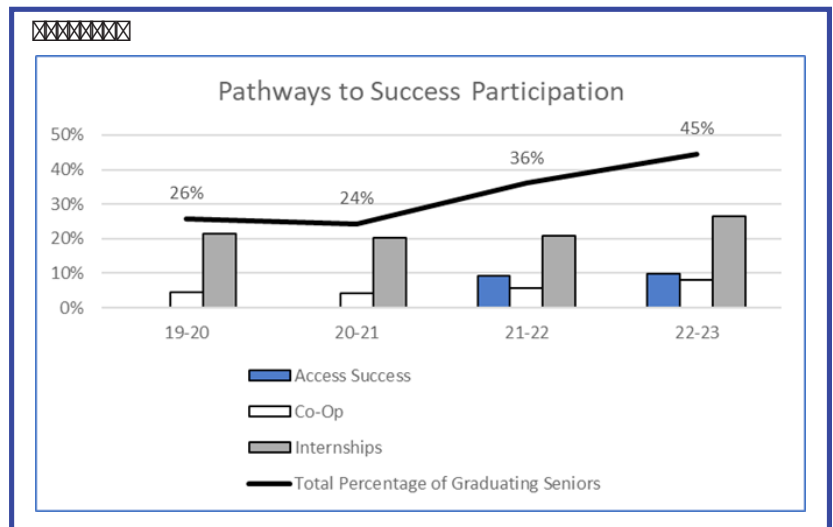
The future of the *Pathways to Success* program is one of continued expansion of opportunities and connections for learners in the Eastern Lancaster County School District. Building upon the relationships that have been forged within the community, five businesses are partnering with curriculum teams and engaging in a pilot program during the 2022-2023 school year to align curriculum and assessments with authentic problems and situations encountered by employees and businesses in our community. Focusing on critical thinking and problem-solving, the goal of this pilot is for

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learners to sharpen their analytical skills and never have to ask, “when will I ever use this?” when in our classrooms.

Further resource allocation is being examined for learners to access local employers and needs are being met through an innovative collaboration between the community and the technical education department. Taking donations from the community of old or broken bicycles, learners who are practicing the skills of welding and fabrication are repurposing parts and components into functioning bicycles, which are then provided to learners who may not have their own transportation to an internship or co-op. It is projected that 10 or more learners who may have otherwise experienced the barrier of transportation will be able to fulfill their goals by receiving these bicycles.

The commitment of the board of school directors, building administration, teachers and job coaches, the community in opening its doors and workplaces, and the learners in seizing these opportunities, have all combined to create a vibrant and sustainable program. Considering the investments made in this program represent just a little over 1% of the total district budget but are positively impacting



almost 1,000 learners at the high school, the return on investment for our district, our community and our learners is significant. Most importantly, each learner is better prepared to become their best in our classrooms and for their future.

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purposeful connections helps students academically grow on a daily basis. This can be completed by learning key variables from students' interests. I often use clothing or team names to help build a positive connection with a child. For example, wearing a T-shirt for a few minutes as students enter the building in the morning because my team lost, and I had to keep my promise (or challenge) to a child. The connection focal point reminds me of the book titled, *Only One You* by Linda Kranz (Kranz, 2006). The book walks readers through the simple steps of listening, making mistakes and learning how to avoid obstacles in the way of life.

In the end, we need to appreciate each other through various forms of care. We do this by learning how to make connections with people even when they don't want us to and finding a way to stay committed to the end goal, which is helping children and young adults grow and learn within our school settings.

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Dr. Krout's school was recognized as a Distinguished Pennsylvania School in 2018, and in 2014, it was rated as an "A rated school" on the school performance profile.

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